



Looking Beyond the Frontiers of Conventional International Business Research: Exploring Opportunities and Making a (Small, But Real) Difference

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*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
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—Robert Frost*

When Springer first approached me to edit a forward-looking Handbook, my first reaction was a “Thank you, but no.” The previous two IB handbooks were edited by luminaries and eminent scholars, both distinguished professors when I was still a doctoral student. Indeed, I was honored to be asked but “No, thank you.” Theirs were *very* big shoes to fill and I was unsure I could fill them well, if at all. The passage of time, however, offers a perspective like no other and I relented after Springer’s persistence and unshakable faith in what it believed we all could collectively achieve. The world has changed significantly just in the last few years even though our community of scholars has mostly stayed loyal to its conventional research agenda. All upheavals call for strategic and operational disconnects in mindsets and behaviors, so the opportunity this Handbook offered would be a platform from which to incite and invigorate them—of course, with the support of like-minded friends and well-wishers. I was in.

Taking on any momentous assignment is quite challenging. It is never easy to incentivize bold thinkers into lending their cerebral prowess to a project that, even though potentially exciting, would impose a toll on their resources. Fortunately for

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me, nearly everyone I approached almost instantly bought into the challenge that this endeavor presented. A few potential contributors excused themselves late in this project. Only two declined due to ongoing commitments; both offered their good wishes. Indeed, I am grateful—as we all should be—to our contributors who have lent their might to this volume and enthusiastically supported it, both in form and spirit. To me, that is the true essence of any community; it is what makes the reimagined future possible.

To the purists among us, some narratives in this volume will no doubt appear to be primitive for they are—deliberately—broad. There is no compelling reason to constrain the future. Indeed, even the most advanced narratives originate in simple ideas as “raw” as these ideas then seem to be. To those who may, unpardonably, rebuff this volume’s forward-looking topics simply as being “fashionable” do so at their own risk. It is much easier to be critical than to be correct. I believe the topics in this volume underscore phenomena that are not only relevant but also urgent for scholars everywhere to consider seriously and tackle quickly. If careful thinking is our currency, then the viewpoints offered in this Handbook surely will add more worth to it.

This 21-chapter compendium is organized in three parts: (1) Enriching IB’s research agenda, (2) Inter-disciplinary topics for IB research, and (3) IB’s broader societal role. Regardless of where each contribution appears in the Handbook, all chapters directly or indirectly underline four themes. One, several contributions in this volume offer a refreshing twist on topics we are (or should be) studying. As with all well-intended (but not always well-received!) parental rebukes, they criticize our current neglect of the “other side” of the proverbial coin, argue for the need to meaningfully treat this deficit, and offer some starting points for us to consider. Importantly, our contributors hint that introspection and self-reflection will be crucial for our discipline’s ongoing advancement. Two, all contributors nudge and encourage us to earnestly revisit our approach to pressing research questions, whether these be conventional questions we have examined (and still do) or challenges now appearing on our radars. Are we framing existing questions in the right way? Are we scanning for the right questions? Indeed, in our ongoing quest to be more relevant as a frontier discipline that can—and must—make a difference to the broader society, it would be prudent to embrace our contributors’ keen insights as part of our scholarly/pedagogical agenda. Whether, when, and how we venture beyond our comfort zones are entirely up to us.

Three, to competently execute the suggested reevaluation, several authors urge us to tap into relevant disciplines that are studying these issues with at least as much vigor as we would. These inter-disciplinary undercurrents are rampant throughout this Handbook, and it is sensible to swim with them. By doing so, we can avail of more nuanced, balanced, and holistic perspectives which supplement the “Productivity-Efficiency-Profitability” lenses with which IB scholars have been preoccupied. Finally, several chapters in this Handbook explicitly discuss vanguard “soft” issues which IB scholars have typically shunned—but issues that now occupy the center stage of any serious global discourse. This refocus pertains not only to the soft issues *per se* but also to explicitly recognizing the changing contours of “hard” issues

which have dominated previous IB conversations. Our contributors provide us with thought-provoking beginnings to redeploy our collective energy. For sure, the topics in this Handbook are not exhaustive. Many more worthy topics could be added to better serve this volume's soul. But paralysis-by-analysis is for real, and there was no reason to wait when all our contributors were eagerly onboard. The 21 chapters in this Handbook propel us into action and show us a clear way forward. Indeed, I trust you too will appreciate the(se) blessings we currently have than regret not having the manna that will surely follow.

1 Reflections on International Business' Current and Future Agenda

The chapters in Part I, Enriching IB's Research Agenda, present insights into the promising landscape of IB research and offer us useful information to carefully consider. The chapter by Verbeke, Kano, and Johnston is premised on the view that competing successfully in a VUCA world requires MNEs to garner a richer, more nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges engendered by relatively recent contextual developments. Their thoughtful piece identifies 10 contemporary modalities that denote "...grand challenges in IB research and practice." This chapter carefully motivates us to *jointly* consider the upsides and downsides of these unmistakable trends—something IB scholars have not always done. In suggesting whether a concurrent appraisal of "...bright and dark sides" is merely a simple summation of these effects or a time-variant, non-linear outcome, Verbeke et. al expertly highlight important opportunities which lie before us.

The chapter by Gaur and Vashishtha takes a relatively conventional—yet very novel—approach to map the foreseeable domain of IB research. The authors' content analyzes Special Issue calls in *JIBS* and *JWB* to identify research themes which journal editors and seasoned scholars deem to be significant for future research. Gaur and Vashishtha consider the principal research questions posed by Special Issue editors as well as dominant theoretical frameworks used, and the thematic and spatial emphases of these calls. Their contribution identifies seven themes that will shape the topography of (Special Issue-induced) thought leadership in IB research. Gaur and Vashishtha conclude with four more themes that are directly or indirectly showcased elsewhere in this Handbook, and advocate we take a "...*bold stand*" (emphasis added) in further advancing our discipline.

The chapter by Wocke and Barnard—both long based in South Africa, and both richly embedded in the African ecosystem of MNEs, governmental agencies, and scholars—offers us fascinating insights into the profound nexus between Sub-Saharan Africa's diversity and recent history and their collective influence on the region's institutions and business environment. These scholars leverage their personal and professional insights to identify four big-picture research themes endemic to Sub-Saharan Africa. Both authors also explicitly acknowledge there are several more interesting topics for researchers to focus on when studying Africa or other world regions with colonial histories. In alerting us to the imperative to

“...seriously consider” (emphasis added) Africa as a worthwhile research setting, Wocke and Barnard implicitly warn IB scholars about bypassing the potential rewards of “...theoretical gains” of studying a much-neglected, I think, but also a very promising region of our world.

The next two chapters—also by very well-informed, locally-invested scholars—echo a similar theme. Based in Central Asia, Akemu and Subramanian too call upon IB scholars to consider a broader portfolio of geographies as research settings. Drawing parallels with familiar IB topics, their work underlines the splendor of revisiting them in Central Asia’s unique milieu of history and geography and its influence on local (business and non-business) institutions. The authors also candidly discuss the trials of conducting scholarly work in this region. Even though these trials are not endemic to Central Asia, it is worth noting that they seem to arise from a lingering disconnect between the challenges we study and those facing practicing managers. The next chapter by (MENA-based) Stephens also implores us to “...create a more inclusive” scholarly agenda which taps into MENA’s extensive contextual diversity and richness. As with previous two chapters, Stephens relies on her rich and diverse experience to deconstruct the region’s exoticism. Her work illustrates promising new areas of “...relevant” (emphasis added) research not captured in current (read, mainstream) IB publications. Notably, Stephens offers us starting points to meaningfully contribute to current IB discourses—via the MENA pathway that denotes “...an excellent opportunity” for our discipline’s continued advancement.

This part’s final chapter by Ooesterle and Wolf is a wistful, philosophical reflection on our contributions to IB. These scholars imply our well-intended endeavors often fall short of their mark on the Relevance axis and stress the need for greater vigilance of “...problems that are likely to impair the upgrading of relevance” in IB research. Their essay suggests our general preference for a self-imposed disciplinary quarantine that, effectively, further removes us from interesting work being done elsewhere. Perhaps we are victims of our own “publication” victories, and a slave to all institutions that glorify, amplify, and reward them. Indeed, if this is truly the case, then our scholarship will have completely “...lost its close linkage” (emphasis added) to the real challenges facing managers. Fortunately, Ooesterle and Wolf share their insights to help us rethink what we are doing, and how, so that we may deliberately steer ourselves away from an abyss of intellectual irrelevance.

2 Pollinating Inter-disciplinary Thinking in International Business

The chapters in Part II, Inter-disciplinary Topics in IB Research, embellish the preceding part’s core theme by demonstrating the power of cross-disciplinary thinking to conventional IB research. Rooted in the “...growing acknowledgement that international business has a larger *transformative* power over societal trends” (emphasis added), Van Assche encourages us to connect mainstream IB research to

public policy issues to address pressing societal challenges—some of which are the discussed elsewhere in this volume. A leading proponent of this nexus, Van Assche’s contribution starts by formally defining international business policy, and how IB scholarship can mediate the linkage between various government roles and societal challenges. This piece is an insightful narrative, simple in its core ideas but powerful in its “. . .break out [from our] comfort zone” message that we should consciously heed.

Equally thought-provoking, and with futuristic undertones, is the next chapter by Vagadia who competently examines digitization’s impact on “. . .(International) Business” and—through it—on the global canvas. Predicting that this impact is “. . .likely to be as dramatic, if not bigger than the previous industrial revolutions,” Vagadia unpacks the meaning of digitization and discusses the inevitable impact of 10 current and emerging technologies on organizations, societies, and economies. As with other contributions in this volume, this chapter too promotes a fundamental readjustment that may necessitate “. . .tearing up” (emphasis added) incumbent playbooks to fully harness the disruptive power of new technologies for society’s greater good.

The chapter by Knight and Khan continues the theme of technology and its disruptive potency but adopts a more scholarship-focused approach. It also identifies several leading technologies, yet differentiates itself by providing an assorted theoretical backdrop against which to continue studying the linkage between technology and IB. These underpinnings are beneficial for they connect the future (i.e., technology development) and past (i.e., established IB frameworks) and serve as an umbilical cord to make sense of what essentially is still evolving. In doing so, Knight and Khan exemplify the essence of careful scholarship. They conclude their work by discussing the practical implications of anticipated technological shifts on organizations worldwide—noting that the “. . .most successful firms will possess an action orientation and technological competency.”

The next chapter by Blay and Froese takes a softer, but no less profound, view of how cross-disciplinary thinking can enliven IB research. Their work scrutinizes the notion of Global virtual teams and rests on the view that organizational propensity for such teams “. . .is inevitable.” Emphasizing the ongoing inter-play between technology and human resources, Blay and Froese skillfully weave arguments from these distinct domains to increase our understanding of the globally-distributed workplace. Their chapter develops a framework to holistically study this topic and suggests exciting pathways to enrich IB research and practice. Indeed, our current appetite for greater workplace flexibility, combined with an ongoing revisionist view of work, suggests that the tenets in Blay and Froese’s dialog will occupy a seat at the head table of global conversations. In that sense, these authors’ contribution will serve as a blueprint for future work.

The chapter by Jensen, Manning, and Petersen is equally innovative in demonstrating another adept recombination, here among IB, Operations management, and Strategy. Focusing on “location flexibility” as a basis of sustainable competitive advantage, these authors explore the tradeoffs between efficiency and imitability by splicing arguments from the Supply chain and Resource-based view

literatures. Considered separately, one could argue that these two concepts insinuate divergent—even competing—triggers for creating a lasting competitive advantage. Yet, Jensen et. al posit a middle ground that reconciles these seemingly disparate viewpoints. While admittedly a preliminary effort, as these authors declare, their contribution shows the raw power of cross-disciplinary spillovers which supersede the insights generated by solitary perspectives. Indeed, Jensen et al.’s subtle message also delineates certain boundary conditions that *per se* offer additional avenues for continued theoretical development and serious empirical work. Getting fresh perspectives accepted by a community of scholars is, no doubt, still difficult. Yet, Jensen et al.’s work establishes that these ideas are not only imperative for our discipline’s advancement but also relevant for tackling the real challenge of crafting a dominant industry position.

The chapter by Oh and Oetzel focuses on four types of non-market risks in IB. Their chapter (rightly) assumes “. . .growing concerns” about natural and technological disasters and political and social conflicts. It anticipates these risks will “. . .at least temporarily” change the familiar context in which IB occurs. Among the leading scholars in the “non-market” space, Oh and Oetzel explain the principal characteristics of each of these risks and discuss the main drivers of MNEs’ awareness, preparedness, and response to these risks. To advance a topic that is “. . .still very new to the [IB] discipline,” Oh and Oetzel conclude with a 5-point research agenda which many among us will find worthy of pursuit. Indeed, if appropriately channelized, our efforts in these directions could make a critical, and urgently needed, impact.

This part’s final chapter, by Birkinshaw, is a short, reflective piece that confronts some of the “. . .conventional orthodoxies that dominate [IB] literature.” It focuses on large, established MNEs domiciled (mostly) in developed markets. Birkinshaw offers a provocative view of the above-noted class of MNEs and argues continuance of their entrenched role—despite certain global commotions that would suggest otherwise. His prediction is bold indeed but, as most of us surely know, it is richly informed by his engagement with MNEs worldwide. Birkinshaw concludes by outlining some thought-provoking implications for MNEs of the future. What trials will these MNEs face and how will they effectively respond to them? Who, fundamentally, will these “. . .‘big beasts’ of the corporate world” be? Going forward, what role will they play and be expected to play in an increasingly mindfulness-oriented cosmos? These are fascinating questions, among others, to ponder and discuss—even if they cannot all be tested empirically. In that sense, Birkinshaw inspires us to pause a bit and contemplate the future of MNEs which we may not have thought much about.

3 The Societal Role of International Business and Academia

If the previous part echoed hard IB topics, this part counterbalances it. The chapters in this part mostly focus on soft(er) issues that have *relatively* recently entered mainstream discussions in our discipline. Benito and Fehlnert’s chapter leads this

theme with a discussion of MNE role vis-à-vis the Circular economy, a notion which is similar in spirit to recycling but likely goes beyond it. Drawing on theoretical arguments from the Strategy and IB literatures, these authors map the macro-meso interface to help MNEs shape a more sustainable economic development. Benito and Fehner conclude their insightful discussion with four promising research themes, noting that more IB research “. . . is needed” to urgently accelerate transition toward a broader, stronger, and more intense circular ecosystem.

Ghauri and Cooke’s chapter similarly emphasizes the sustainability theme (as do the next few chapters). Specifically, it discusses the role of MNEs in achieving United Nations’ sustainable development goals whose main purpose is to “. . . alleviate inequalities, injustice and create a healthy environment for all.” Ghauri and Cooke provide an excellent and succinct overview of these 17 intertwined goals and their linkages to MNEs. Clearly, as the chapter suggests, there are many promising and relevant inquiries to mine in this area. Interested IB researchers will surely find that this chapter offers considerable food for thought. However, Ghauri and Cooke also prudently caution us to “. . . separate the rhetoric from the reality” when conducting research in this domain. Even though CSR is active on corporate radars, it seems that “. . . greenwashing” is real too. Clearly, Ghauri and Cooke urge careful empiricism. We would do particularly well to consciously heed Ghauri and Cooke’s pragmatic thinking.

The chapter by Rao-Nicholson and Liou also discusses the role of MNEs in attaining sustainable development goals, but it does so through the lens of culture. It is an important lens—especially given the fluidity of interpretations in singular contexts—and one that can “. . . constrain or facilitate” MNEs’ responses to societal obligations. Recognizing this tension, Rao-Nicholson and Liou propose a neat conceptual model with three key contingencies. Their work concludes by outlining three fruitful avenues for IB (and non-IB) scholars to consider. In contrast, the next chapter by Rammal takes a downstream view of the sustainability phenomenon to deliberate how MNEs report their sustainability practices to “. . . engage” with stakeholders worldwide. This is a crucial endeavor for it permits us to isolate “stuff” from fluff. Unless results can be reasonably evaluated (measured?), they can be difficult to improve upon. Rammal’s work relies on three well-publicized events to facilitate a better understanding of this fundamental message. Indeed, as Rammal shrewdly concludes, without action “. . . MNEs will be *merely* identifying the problem without being part of the solution” (emphasis added). Surely, we would not want that schoolish deferment.

The next two chapters change gears while still advocating investigations of important societal issues, albeit from an IB perspective. The chapter by Cervantes, Dang, and Eapen is unique in that it is the only empirical study in this volume. It also stands out for explicitly joining a hard and a soft theme (i.e., FDI and human development). As with some of the previous chapters, the authors recognize inherent duality of phenomena (here, FDI), arguing that there is an optimal level beyond which the net outcomes (here, human development) are negative. This shift from monotonic to non-monotonic thinking is, frankly, quite refreshing. What is the “global optima” (to borrow from Operations Research) beyond which our inputs

generate outputs that are *contrary* to those we intended? This is not just a design issue. As many of our contemporaries ponder this dilemma whereas some ignore it and others (especially practitioners) grieve about it, it is sensible to reevaluate what, where, and how we can appreciably contribute to make ourselves more relevant.

The chapter by Muibi and Fitzsimmons also examines a promising area of inquiry: Human migration. It argues that this topic should be important to our discipline but recognizes this may be due to a parochial view of what migration involves and who migrants really are. As such, Muibi and Fitzsimmons offer us a richer, broader metaphor for understanding how we can taxi for an eventual takeoff. Their work derives from a survey of the IB literature. Muibi and Fitzsimmons deserve our compliments for revealing a frontier we have yet to fully appreciate. Their work exposes varied research themes that span disciplines and offer us a large canvas on which to paint attractive murals. Indeed, as these scholars conclude, “. . .our field’s research is *unusually* transactional. Individuals are almost exclusively seen [as] potential resources that may be exploited to facilitate international firm activities. It would be akin to looking at a beautiful river and seeing only the energy-production possibilities of building a dam” (emphasis added).

This volume’s final chapter, by Purg and Walravens, is a powerful conclusion to the now well-recognized obligations of academia to the larger society. This recognition transcends any single discipline, including IB. Yet, given its inter-disciplinary foci and global reach, IB can—and must—play a lead role in solidifying this association. Purg and Walravens offer us an inspiring historical narrative about how two Europe-based institutions envisioned and “. . .put” society at the core of business schools and business enterprises. These scholars document the trials and tribulations of these pioneering efforts and candidly confess to an “. . . ‘innocent naivety’: the belief that ‘modern’ management knowledge and skill would *naturally* offer something ‘positive’ for society” (emphasis added). Our erudition is a useful starting point, but it is not—and cannot be—an end in itself. Sadly, scholarship does not automatically imply action. Many still seem to suffer from this overly simplistic and lazy approach to fulfilling societal mandates. Fortunately, Purg and Walravens, like other contributors to this volume, offer us a compelling blueprint to leverage the many kernels of actionable wisdom they offer in their short essay.

4 Some Concluding Thoughts

One of the perks of editing a Handbook is the extraordinary privilege to work with thought leaders who not only share their ideas but also infect others with their passion for them. Indeed, I am very fortunate to know and work with our contributors whose contemplations I hope I have fairly summarized in this essay. Another perk is having an early peek into where (and how) these intellectuals think we should channelize our energies. Their profound theses hold a vast repository of ideas and directions that I am honored to present to you. For their participation, enthusiasm, and optimism, I remain deeply grateful. Please join me in sincerely thanking them for the promising pathways they have lit for all of us.



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